THE FORT ORD MERIT-REWARD SYSTEM

by

Lt. Col. William E. Datel

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Preface Note

This paper was written in April 1971 after the editor of ARMY had personally solicited the author to prepare such an article for publication in his magazine. After what was apparently an extensive review process, but only after direct inquiry was the author told that the paper was unsuitable for publication in ARMY. The manuscript was said to be "too technical" and the author was advised to seek the assistance of a "good public information officer" to help in the preparation of the manuscript.

Be that as it may. Since this paper was written, the Merit-Reward System continues to operate in all BCT units at Fort Ord and is governed by local command directive (Fort Ord Reg 600-4). However, upon completion of the USCONARC test of the MRS at other training centers during the spring of 1971, the MRS was not adopted for recruit training Army-wide.

The style of the paper was conditioned by the format specifications and by the assumed reader audience of ARMY magazine. The present reader will find a more or less chronological, developmental narrative and will have to make do without headings, references, tables, footnotes, or other hallmarks of more scientific presentations.

The author feels it important to preserve the paper as it was submitted to ARMY so that the reader may draw his own conclusions about the enigmatic refusal to publish.

All statements, assertions and opinions voiced in the paper are those of the author only and should not be construed as carrying the endorsement of Department of the Army. While the work described in the paper is that of thousands of people (counting the trainees and their critiques), the author assumes sole responsibility for the way in which the work is described.

W.E.D.
8 June 1972
Fort Ord, California

The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army.

Major General John M. Schofield

11 August 1879

In the fall of 1969, under the command direction and support of Major General Phillip B. Davidson, Jr., Fort Ord began development of a program of contingency management in Army basic combat training (BCT). This program is called the Merit-Reward System (MRS). After approximately one year of testing and development, on 2 November 1970, General Davidson directed all BCT units at Fort Ord, as each began a new cycle, to conduct training under the MRS. Since that date, Fort Ord has extended the MRS into second-eight weeks Infantry training. In the summer of 1970 and again in March of 1971, the United States Army Continental Command directed further tests of the MRS at other United States Army Training Centers. Also, the U.S. Naval Training Base at Orlando, Florida adapted the MRS for testing with naval recruits in early 1971. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy at New London, Connecticut has designed a program of contingency management along the lines of the MRS.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of the MRS at Fort Ord. In so doing, the MRS will be placed in a context from which it may be viewed as one example of the kind of technological fallout possible

from modern behavioral science. It is the intent of the paper to provide a description of some of the major considerations and problems in MRS development. Finally, while not a recipe, it is hoped that the information contained herein will be of assistance to that courageous commander who some day elects to use a similar method to improve the performance, motivation, and morale of his troops.

In behavioral science, contingency management refers to the orderly arrangement of consequences to prescribed behaviors. When behavior A is performed, then the manager of the contingencies sees to it that consequence B results. Once this linkage of "When A, then B" is established, A can be expected to occur with a high degree of probability so long as there remains some likelihood that B, or its associated accompaniments, will ensue.

Contingency management represents the application to organizational situations (industrial, educational, correctional, medical) of the laws and procedures of operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning grew out of a rather distinctly American brand of psychology known as behaviorism. J. B. Watson is usually given credit as the founder. It was Watson, writing in the 1920's, who said: Give me a healthy infant and I will make him into a doctor, lawyer, artist, or any other kind of specialist I might select.

While Watson may have been guilty of overstating his case, some 50 years later the assertion can be read as having been prophetic. Today a behavioral technology, sown in the soils of Watsonian behavorism, has sprouted and taken root. This, after centuries of philosophical observation

and introspection about the psychology of man. This, in spite of the blind alleys constructed by contemporary "depth psychology," with its psychoanalytic wanderings and its groping group encounters.

Professor B. F. Skinner of Harvard University is the one person primarily responsible for the theoretical development, the basic research, and the technological pay-off of operant conditioning. Professor Skinner's life-long efforts and brilliant contributions have created a following of students and researchers in every major American university.

Just as in physiology, history will come to record the fact that psychology scored its major advance by way of the animal laboratory. The white rat in a Skinner box, pressing a lever to obtain a food pellet, has been the prototype for countless animal studies given over to identifying the crucial parameters in the operant conditioning phenomenon. Today the technical literature of behavioral psychology is replete with applications of operant conditioning at the top of the phylogenetic scale. Speech correction, eradication of psychiatric symptoms, acquisition of educational skills, promotion of socially responsible behaviors, and extinction of undesirable behavior patterns are examples wherein this relatively new and rapidly expanding behavioral technology is currently used to solve personal and social problems.

The word operant in operant conditioning refers to operant behavior. Behavior which "operates" on the environment, or produces environmental effects, is said to be operant behavior. One moment's reflection will correctly suggest that almost all of our behavior in carrying out social intercourse is operant behavior--written and spoken language, manipulation of the tools in our culture, locomotion--thus falling within the purview of operant conditioning.

It is important to realize that operant conditioning acts upon us all of the time, whether we like it or not. Our behavior always has consequences and depending upon the nature of those consequences, our behavior will be conditioned accordingly. The operant dictum of "Behavior is determined by its consequences" is not restricted to the learning laboratory nor to programs of contingency management. Rather, such programs are an attempt to recognize and constructively capitalize on the "laws" of human behavior to which man is unavoidably subject.

The objectives of the MRS at Ford Ord were to improve the performance of the soldier-in-training and, at the same time, raise morale and create a better attitude toward the Army. Guided by operant conditioning thinking, it was assumed that if the consequences ensuing from the recruit's behavior could be formally programmed and systematically applied, the recruit would better learn and perform those behaviors required of him and would be more satisfied as a result of experiencing that what he accomplishes counts.

The initial task was one of identifying those consequences which could be feasibly manipulated and applied. Also, the consequences had to have "meaning" or motivational value. Clearly, the consequences had to have strong incentive value for the soldier; or, if avoidance conditioning principles were to be employed, usable aversions (displeasures) would have to be known.

(Avoidance conditioning--"Do this, or else"--is an effective means of shaping and maintaining desired performance. Every dog trainer worth his salt has seen its fruits. However, since the Fort Ord Command was just as interested in promoting favorable attitudes as in developing good performance,

we discarded any thoughts concerning an avoidance conditioning strategy. It has been observed, for example, that the monkey trained to perform tasks in a space capsule by use of a positive reinforcement schedule (food pellets) reenters the space capsule environment with enthusiasm; the monkey trained to perform the same tasks by teaching him to avoid an electric shock is a menance to his handler come time to reenter his work environment).

To identify the incentives which could be used as consequences in the Merit-Reward System of contingency management, we conducted surveys of basic trainees who were near the completion of their first-eight weeks of training. The details of this procedure are described in a paper recently submitted for publication in the/ Journal of Biological Psychology and will not be repeated here (see W. E. Datel and L. J. Legters, "Reinforcement Measurement in a Social System"). The finding most germane to our present discourse was the extremely high incentive ratings accorded those items in the survey having to do with time-off privileges. For example, "Being given a 3-day pass" received a rating of 6.93 on a scale in which a rating of 7.00 was maximum. Promotion was also rated as a strong incentive. The item "Receiving a promotion to E-2" was rated 6.73.

A $20 cash award had high incentive value (6.74), but organizational constraints precluded its utilization as a manipulatable consequence in the MRS. We also learned that mementos or ceremonies recognizing individual achievement, while definitely incentives, were less powerful motivators than those already mentioned. Similarly, rewards allocated on a group basis were found to have lesser incentive priority than rewards allocated on an individual basis.

The survey, then, served to identify and verify the principal contingencies--time-off privileges and promotions--to be managed as rewards in the Merit-Reward System. In operant conditioning jargon, end-rewarding consequences are known as primary reinforcement.

Reinforcement, applied systematically, is the ingredient responsible for the shaping and maintenance of behavior. Reinforcement is of two classes: primary (just described) and secondary. Secondary reinforcement is a representation of, or is associated with, the primary reinforcement which is to follow. In the case of the rat in the Skinner box, the click of the lever takes on secondary reinforcing properties. In the case of a contingency management program in a social system, secondary reinforcement is in the form of "tokens" or points which are simply designated as necessary holdings before the primary reinforcement can be obtained. In the Fort Ord program, merits (allocated on the basis of performance rendered) are the secondary reinforcement in the Merit-Reward System.

(The operant conditioners have taught us much about the properties of reinforcement. One may think that if a little reinforcement is good, a lot is better. Not so, in terms of performance. In the animal laboratory, the length of the time intervals between reinforcement deliveries and the number of times a response is made before a food pellet is given have been found to influence greatly the amount of work an animal will perform. Viewed alongside these refinements, social programs of contingency management are admittedly still in a crude phase of development. Until we develop optimal reinforcement schedules in human situations, contingency management programs will suffer from a relative lack of precision).

The awarding of merits, in turn leading to privileges and promotions, therefore, formed the consequence portion of the MRS design. These were the reinforcement for which the soldiers would perform certain behaviors. What behaviors? It was time for command to re-inquire into exactly what it wanted the soldier undergoing basic combat training to do, to learn, to be.

A straightforward question, the answer to which we found to be elusive and complex. Most commanders can state in general terms the objectives of basic combat training. But, how does one translate the phrase "skilled in fundamentals of soldiery" into specific behavioral requirements? The subject schedules of instruction offer concrete assistance, but of course do not specifically delineate the behavioral priorities. Are housekeeping habits as important as physical fitness? It can be argued that in basic training drill and ceremonies are more essential than expertise with the rifle. Should drill sergeant judgment of a recruit's performance be given greater emphasis than objective test results in establishing criteria for judging desired behavior? Are there particular times in the training cycle when certain kinds of behavior are more in demand than at other times? What are the behavioral referents of "military discipline?"

These questions are examples of the problems encountered in designing the behavioral portion of the MRS. If contingency management accomplishes nothing else, it forces "management" to examine more closely than ever before its objectives.

The problems of (a) which behaviors to reinforce, (b) how much reinforcement to allocate to each behavioral activity, and (c) what were to

be the decision criteria for whether or not behaviors were actually performed were resolved by soliciting the judgments of a jury of experts (commanders and drill sergeants) and by considerable empirical trial-and-error in constructing reinforcement schedules (i.e., merit allocation by activity by behavioral criterion by week of training).

A problem intertwined with those just listed was the question of how expensive the privileges should be. We realized that the effectiveness of the "token economy" we were constructing would be governed significantly by the availability of merits vis a vis the cost of the privileges. If the rewards were placed out of reach of most of the men, the MRS as a motivational device would fail. Poor results could also be expected if there were an over-abundance of merits in circulation or if the price of the privileges were too cheap. Ideally, we strove to build a system in which there were the prospect of something for everyone, but more for some than for others--depending upon the performance rendered. We got at this problem by establishing different orders of privilege, with the less expensive privileges granting less time-off than the more expensive privileges. Also, to become eligible for any privilege, a certain minimum number of merits had first to be accumulated. The better performing trainees thus become privilege-eligible more quickly.

The design of a contingency management program, therefore, is forced to give much consideration to the details of the linkage between the prescribed behaviors and the arranged consequences. In addition to the issues already discussed, there are other essential matters which require attention: establishing a credible bookkeeping/accounting procedure, communicating the rules of the system to all of the participants, orienting and training the

operators in executing the system, and developing methods for quality control monitoring of the system.

In the original design of the MRS, an individualized merit card, kept in the possession of each soldier at all times, was the vehicle used to record merits earned. Using a railroad conductor's punch with a unique die, the drill sergeant punched out color-coded merit fields on the card as the soldier performed the prescribed behaviors. At the end of each week, each soldier's merit earnings were tabulated from the card and recorded in a master platoon log. Cash-in time was the weekly event wherein a formal inventory of the soldier's merit holdings was made and the soldier decided either to save his merits for a later, higher-order privilege or to spend them for an immediate privilege. The platoon log was also useful in tallying each soldier's total merit earnings for the cycle, thus enabling the selection for promotion to E-2 of the top 35% of the merit-earners. The details of this version of the MRS are presented elsewhere (see W. E. Datel and L. J. Legters, "The Psychology of the Army Recruit," Journal of Biological Psychology, in press).

In spite of the psychological advantages inherent in a personal document, the punch-card method of dispensing the secondary reinforcement was found to be unfeasible in the basic training setting. The number of trainees (40 to 50) per drill sergeant led to an excessive amount of time spent in punching the cards. Also, the idea of "punching someone's ticket" did not conform well with the drill sergeant image. Therefore, in the revised version of the MRS--the so-called "modified" MRS--a platoon roster method is used in lieu of the card and punch. Each soldier's merit earnings, by activity

performed, are entered on the roster and posted daily on the platoon bulletin board. We have learned that the roster is a feasible, adequate bookkeeping device and a more natural tool for the drill sergeant.

For a program of contingency management to work effectively, the rules of the system must be set forth in public, almost legalistic, detail. In the MRS at Fort Ord, three documents accomplish this purpose.

The post regulation, dated 2 November 1970, directed the implementation of the MRS in all basic training units and provides overall guidance to unit commanders. "The Drill Sergeant's Manual for the Merit-Reward System" sets forth the rationale and principles of the MRS, specifies the activities on which a soldier can earn merits, gives the performance criteria for the awarding of merits in each activity, defines the privileges, lists the merits required to obtain each privilege, and provides specific guidance on how the system is operated. "The Soldier Handbook for the Merit-Reward System" is an abbreviated version of the drill sergeant's manual, but contains sufficient detail to give each trainee, along with the incoming company briefing he receives, a thorough description of how the MRS works. (The interested reader may request sample copies of these documents by writing to the CG, Fort Ord, ATTN: DPT, TMEC).

The most perfectly balanced "economy" and the clearest book of rules will not, in and of themselves, assure the effectiveness of a contingency management program. The key to the successful operation of the program is the man who administers it. In the MRS, this man is the drill sergeant. He dispenses the reinforcement according to the prescribed schedule and criteria. He renders the instructional feedback so that the soldier may learn how to increase his merit earnings. He enlivens and interprets the rules of the

system. He respects the motivational power in a single merit. He is the instrument by which the contingencies are managed for each soldier in the platoon.

To the extent that leaders prefer to apply their own personal, arbitrary consequences to the behavior of the men under them, executing the leadership role within the confines of a contingency management program can be unpalatable. In effect, the MRS shifts the locus of power from the more personal reward-punishment decisions of the drill sergeant and embodies this power in a formalized, institutionalized set of rules. Under the MRS, the challenge to the drill sergeant is no longer how, as a father-surrogate, he can motivate men by personalized giving and taking; rather, the challenge becomes how good an interpreter he can become of a system wherein the motivational elements are already established.

In the MRS, the drill sergeant's energies are freed for use in instruction and teaching rather than continuously bound up in an allout effort of getting the men to do what is required of them. This re-ordering of priorities in the drill sergeant role brings about a fundamental change in the drill sergeant-trainee relationship.

Traditionally, trainees are literally at the mercy of their drill sergeant, much like children beholden to a parent. In the MRS, however, the drill sergeant is not the guard of a hostage. Instead he is a coach, an instructor, a technician. He is an expert with a set of skills and knowledge which he imparts to his students. He stands to be judged accordingly. The respect he wins comes not from the fact that he is placed in a situation of arbitrary power, but from his proficiency in communicating skills and his propriety in operating a prescribed system of rewards. The parameters of the MRS increase the likelihood of creating an enduring, mature

relationship between drill sergeant and trainee--a relationship which will color the soldier's perspective of the Army, long after he leaves basic training.

A contingency management program must be regarded as incomplete until methods for monitoring its on-going operation are inserted. The purpose of such monitoring devices is two-fold: To detect instances and areas of faulty operation of the program, so that corrective action can be taken; and, to serve as indicators of the overall results and effectiveness of the program. Fort Ord uses several instruments/methods for quality control monitoring of the MRS.

Each week each company files a "Merit-Reward Status Report" with higher headquarters and with the Directorate of Plans and Training (DPT). This report lists the average number of merits earned, by platoon, by activity. Also, the number and kind of privileges taken for the week are stated. The report includes a section which invites the company commander to mention any specific problems that arose in the operation of the system during the week. This report is used by command echelons to detect major deviations in merit allocations or privilege usage in specific units.

At two-week intervals, beginning in "fill" week, all trainees in each company provide an anonymous statement of their morale. At present, morale is measured by the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (MAACL), a list of 132 words which describe feelings. Each trainee marks those words which best describe his mood state "during the past week." The MAACL is scored by automatic data processing equipment, and company mean scores are fed back through brigade headquarters. The morale data provide a "fever chart" for

each company as it progresses through the training cycle. When morale scores dip, concerned commanders investigate the cause. MAACL results for the training center as a whole, plotted by calender date, provide a kind of Dow-Jones Index of morale at Fort Ord across time, thus enabling study of the summation effect upon morale of program innovation.

At four-week intervals, beginning in Week 4, all trainees are administered an instrument called the Company Evaluation Inventory (CEI). The CEI is a list of 50 statements or assertions, for example, "Privileges did become available as promised." The trainee indicates his degree of agreement with these assertions on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from a rating of 1--disagree strongly, to 7--agree strongly. Item content is organized under three parts: Part I is composed of items reflecting the fidelity and judiciousness of MRS administration. Part II contains items having to do with the soldier's living and training conditions. Part III measures attitude toward the Army. In addition to making the numerical ratings, each trainee is encouraged to give written comments on the quality of the training received.

The numerical data from the CEI are key punched and processed by computer. Brigade/battalion headquarters and each company receive a print-out of the items with the resultant quantitative ratings. These ratings, together with the written comments, are a useful management device for the commander to sense the pulse of attitude/opinion on company administration practices and policies. For example, if the item "Merits were recorded soon after they were earned" receives a low rating, a problem area in the operation of the MRS is identified. Similarly, if the item "The food was well prepared and was appetizing" receives a high rating, the company mess personnel deserve credit.

Company Trainee Councils were established at Fort Ord by post directive in February 1970. The purpose of these councils is to further communication between trainees and company commanders, so that problems having an adverse effect upon morale or performance can be identified and corrected. The councils meet bi-weekly and are composed of the company commander as chairman, the First Sergeant, the Senior Drill Sergeant, and two trainee representatives, selected by the trainees themselves, from each platoon. The councils have been so successful as an adjunctive communication vehicle and as an added quality control of training/administration that USCONARC has directed their implementation, under the name of Training Improvement Seminars, throughout the USATC commands.

In addition to the above monitoring methods, Fort Ord keeps a watchful eye on the more traditional indicators of attrition and performance. Attrition, defined as failure to graduate with the originating cycle, is classified into "chargeable" versus "unchargeable" losses. Chargeable losses (e.g., AWOL's and training injuries) are considered to be a more direct reflection of training methods and management policies than are unchargeable losses (e.g., fraudulent entries and recycles due to emergency leave).

Basic Rifle Marksmanship (BRM), the Physical Combat Proficiency Test (PCPT) and the comprehensive test given at the end of the cycle are regarded as the main performance indicators. However, not only the company's average score on these tests, but also the percentage of trainees failing the tests, and the percentage of trainees showing up for the tests are used as reflections of the effectiveness of the training received.

Fort Ord carries its monitoring of unit efficiency one step further.

The Unit Analysis Report (UAR) is a numerical synthesis of the measurements obtained on each unit in each of the four areas discussed above: (a) Morale (MAACL scores), (b) Administration (CEI ratings), (c) Attrition (chargeable attrition rate), and (d) Performance (performance results). The UAR has come to be regarded by commanders as a comprehensive managerial tool for the identification of strong and weak companies, and for spotting strong and weak areas within a given company. It is obvious that the UAR can also serve as a decision basis for the distribution of rewards to the training cadre themselves.

Here, then, is the Fort Ord Merit-Reward System, described in this paper as a "for instance" of modern contingency management procedures. Has Fort Ord, via the MRS, achieved its objectives of higher morale, increased motivation, and better performance?

These questions, too, require discursive, detailed answers. And results are not the central topic at hand. We can say, however, that trainee morale at Fort Ord, as measured by the MAACL, has risen dramatically since the pre-MRS measurements made in early 1970. There is a recorded gain of more than 8 points on the MAACL scale. We also know that, by and large, trainees like the MRS. Ratings between 6.00 and 7.00 on the 7-point scale are not uncommon for the item "Trainees like the MRS." In terms of attitude change we have noted a gradual, upward climb on the CEI item that measures re-enlistment intention. (However, one must realize that the influence of across-the-board VOLAR changes at Fort Ord render study of pure MRS effects impossible).

Our chargeable attrition rates average about 4.5% but we have no pre-

MRS data with which to make comparisons. Performance on BRM and PCPT have held up well, despite the cut-back to a 5-day training week. End-of-cycle proficiency testing under VOLAR at Fort Ord is in an experimental, developmental stage, and therefore of no value in rendering an empirical comment on MRS effects. In all fairness it should be mentioned that drill sergeant opinion, as measured by surveys, on the efficacy of the MRS is strongly divided.

The MRS has brought new methods of training, measurement, and management into the Army training context. Advocates of the MRS-approach to training recruits at Fort Ord find reassurance in the fact that the procedures instigated, though they may indeed embody moral principles indigenous to western man (e.g., "One is entitled to the fruits of his labor"), are not derived from the vagaries of moralizing. Instead, the procedures used rest squarely on the established methods of behavioral science.

In the final analysis, time will be the judge. If the verdict is in favor of continued application of contingency management technology in Army training, surely the impetus provided by the command emphasis, drill sergeant flexibility, and trainee responsiveness in the Fort Ord MRS will have played a significant historical part.

INCLOSURES

Information on the following pages is provided as suggestions for illustrations and marginal inserts to accompany the article.

Written comments by soldiers undergoing basic training under the Merit-Reward System

"The Merit-Reward System is an effective way of getting the men to do what is required. I believe it is one of the best possible methods that could be employed. It brings about more personal effort and also provides more personal reward."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"The Merit-Reward System is really a fair system of judging. It makes everyone want to work. It gives them a goal. I think the Army should keep the Merit-Reward System."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"Basic has helped me fantastically and I feel a lot healthier. The Merit-Reward System is a very good one. It works for 99% of our company. . . . Our company is the best. The cadre is excellent."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"The Merit-Reward System is an excellent tool in reinforcing and creating positive behavior. . . . I feel the merits should be oriented toward the creation of the type of behavior the Army wants. If you want janitors, then give more merits for janitor work. If you want soldiers, give more merits for soldiering."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"The Merit-Reward System is an excellent system to reward the soldier, promote him, encourage him, and base his passes on."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"The Army is better than I thought it would be, like for instance the food, barracks, Drill Sergeants, and the training system."

A recruit trained under the MRS

"I believe the Merit-Reward System is on the right track as far as developing an all volunteer Army. . . . My company has been about 95% fair in giving out merits."

A recruit trained under the MRS

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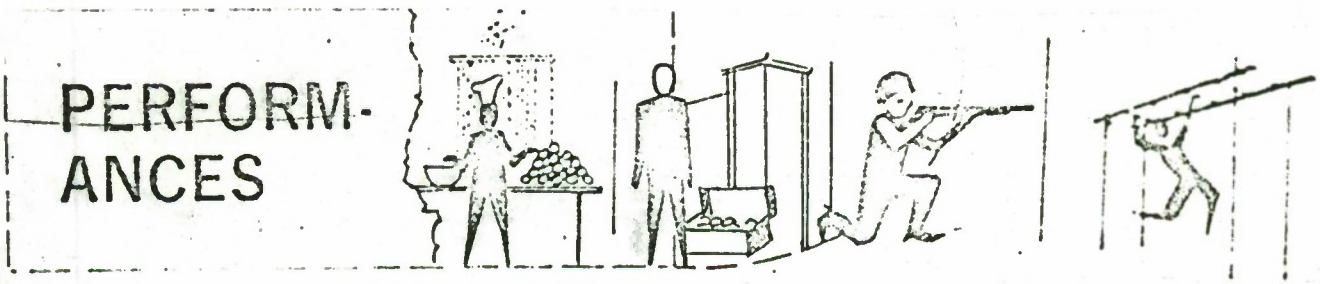

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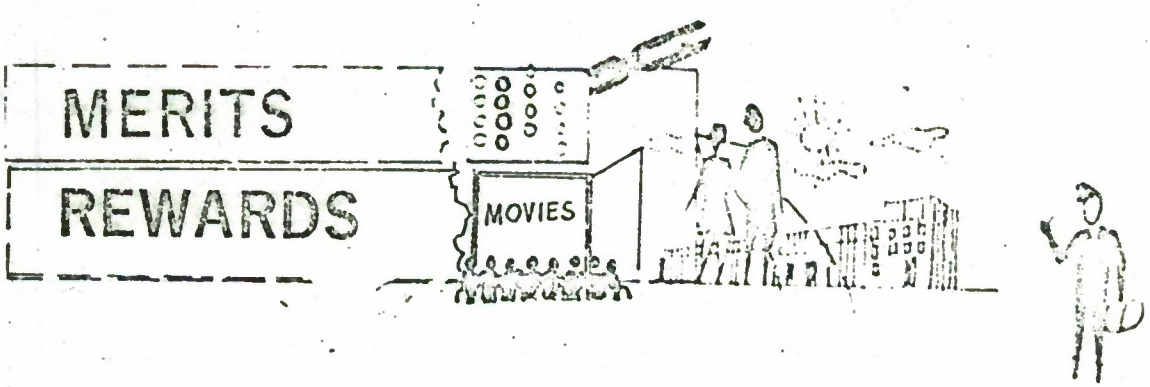
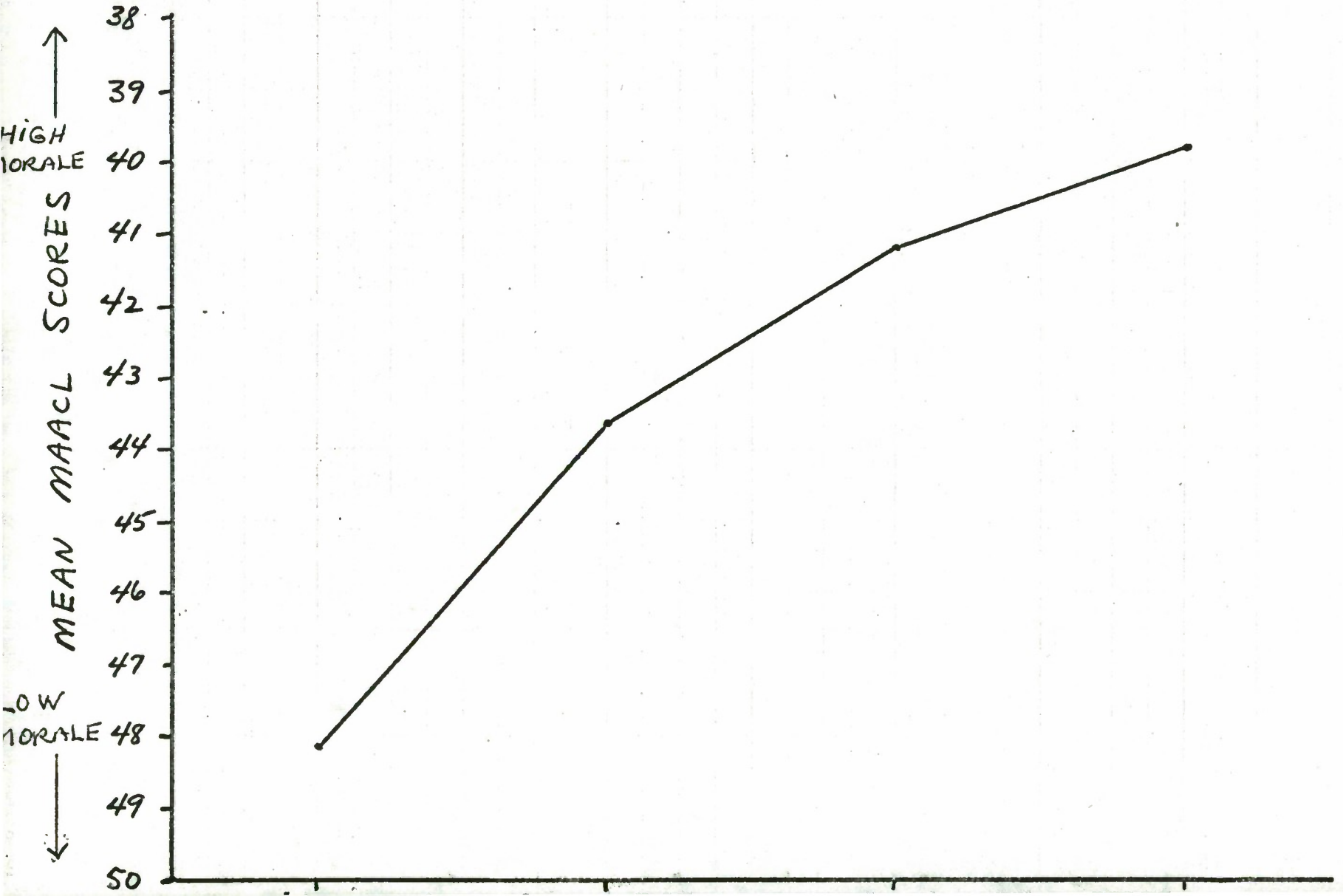


MORALE IN BCT: FORT ORD



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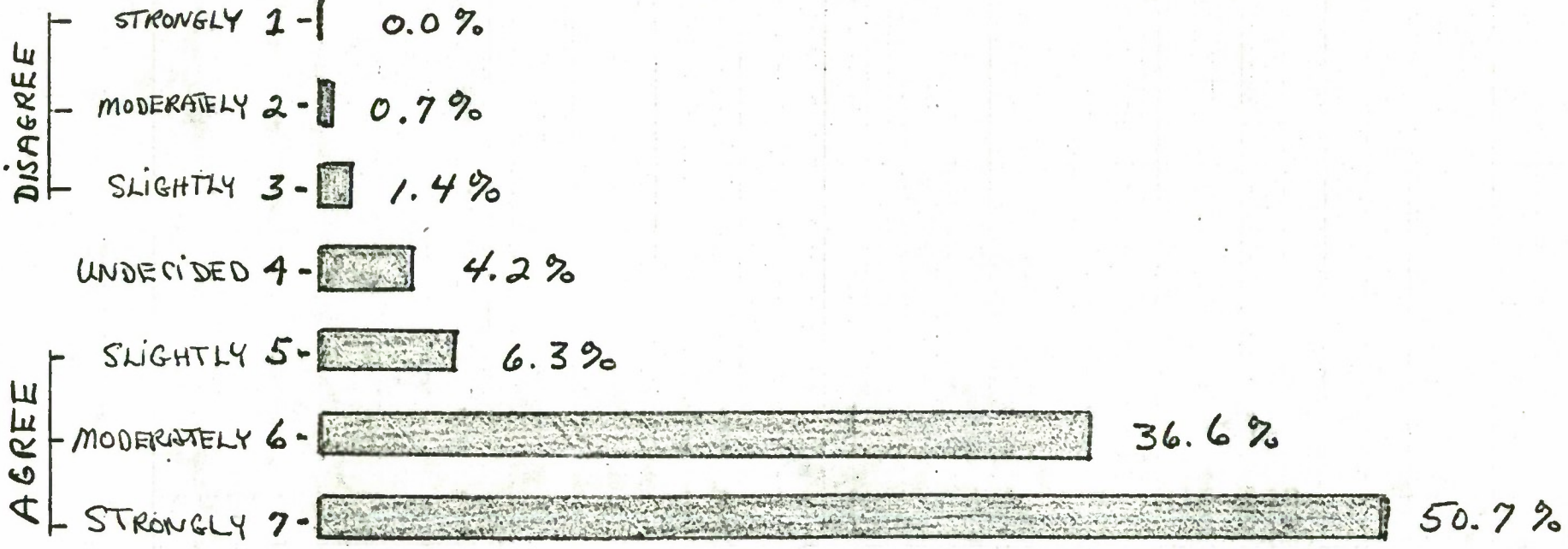

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13. ABSTRACT

The paper describes the development of a program of contingency management (incentive manipulation) in recruit training at Fort Ord, California. This program is called the Merit-Reward System (MRS). (U)

The MRS can be viewed as an applied outgrowth of behaviorism, specifically Skinnerian operant conditioning in a social system. The MRS was developed by conducting reinforcement surveys of the recruits, selecting those incentives rated as very strong and which could be manipulated, devising means for assigning/recording secondary reinforcement (token allocation), selecting/defining the behaviors to be shaped and maintained (i.e., rewarded), communicating the system to the participants, and constructing means for monitoring the execution of the system. (U)

Developmental work on the Fort Ord MRS began in the fall of 1969. The program was implemented in all Fort Ord BCT units in November of 1970 by Post Directive. In June of 1972 the MRS was still in use in all BCT units at Fort Ord. (U)

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reinforcement						
opinion						
rating scale						
rewards						
operant conditioning						
contingency management						
incentive manipulation						
Skinnerian						
behaviorism						
behavior modification						
attitude measurement						
management information system						
leadership						
information feedback						
token economy						
positive conditioning						